

# Edged Weapons:

## THE PERSIAN KĀRD

By Manouchehr Moshtagh Khorasani



Close-up of the *kârd* from the Zand period with the gold-inlaid inscription Mohammad Kazem [the maker's mark]. For a *kârd* with a similar maker's name and floral decoration on its forte, see Zeller and Rohrer (1955:plate XLIII). Zeller and Rohrer state that the piece from the Bernisches Historisches Museum is signed with 'The work of Mohammad Kazem'

**T**he *kârd* is one of the many forms of highly collectable Persian knives which frequently come up for sale at auction. It is the short, single-edged weapon in the Iranian arsenal, its literal translation being 'knife'. According to Pur Davood the *kârd* is the second weapon mentioned in the holy book of the *Avestā*. There, it is called *kareta*, a derivation from the verb *karet*, meaning 'to cut.' In 'Warharan Yasht', verse 27 in the *Avestā*, it is

said that Verethragna has a *kârd* with golden inlays and various ornaments. In the *Šānāme* (*Shahname*), the word *kârd* as a weapon is mentioned four times and the Digital Lexicon of Dehkhoda states that a *kârd* is simply a sharp tool made of iron or steel with a handle and a blade. Today, the word *kârd* is still used to refer to a kitchen knife, which is called *kârd-e āspāzkhāne* [*ashpaskhane*].

A Persian knife or *kârd* is a tool as well as a weapon. Miniatures from the Timurid period seem to confirm this: 'The Preparation for a Feast', attributed to Bihzad c. 1490 AD shows

one of the workers cutting a leek with a *kârd* while the other is using a *kârd* to cut dough. In another miniature from the Timurid period, 'A Royal Feast', one of the workers is cutting dough with a *kârd*, and the other is slitting the throat of a sheep using a *kârd*. All men in the Safavid period carried two *kârd*, both during times of war and peace, and no one left home without these weapons. Miniatures



A curved *kârd* from the Zand period (1750-1794 C.E.)





A *kārđ* from the early Qajar period (1794–1925 C.E.) with the gold-inlaid inscription *amal-e Hādi* (the work of Hādi) and the gilded inscription from the *sura al-Ikhlās* (The Pure Faith) from the *Qur'an* on the forte

from the Safavid period show men carrying *kārđ* on the left side. The suspension system looks exactly the same as their counterparts depicted on Timurid miniatures, meaning that they are hanging from the girdle or the belt via a strap on the left side.

Persian period manuals and books on warfare often talk about *khanjar* (*xanjar*) as a weapon of choice for the close-quarter combat and seldom of *kārđ*. The following passage from the book *Samak Ayyār* clearly shows that a *kārđ* was a weapon that was carried in the bazaar in a civilian context and hence it had a civilian character used to settle disputes as can be seen in the following quote from *al-Kāteb al-Rajāni*, (2004/1383:531): “With this thought, Jangjuy drew his *kārđ*. Khurchāhi [mounted on a horse] started to laugh and said, ‘He thinks he is fighting in the middle of a bazaar!’ Then, he drew his sword and attacked Jangjuy by bringing down his sword. However, Jangjuy bent his head down and covered his head and body under his shield and threw himself under the belly of the horse of Khurchāhi and tore the horse’s belly with his *kārđ*. As a consequence, the horse of Khurchāhi fell, trapping the thigh of its rider [Khurchāhi] under its body. Then, Jangjuy attacked Khurchāhi using his *kārđ*, and hit the chest of Khurchāhi so hard with his *kārđ* that the tip of the *kārđ* came out of Khurchāhi’s back...” An extremely effective and powerful weapon, the *kārđ* was therefore used extensively in urban warfare:

Rāšidoldin Fazlollāh (1985/1374:380) reports in *Jame-al Tavāriḫ* that people from the city of Qazvin defended themselves with *kārđ* in the alleyways against even the Mongols.

### The importance of the *Kārđ*

Highly decorated *kārđ-hā* with beautiful *jōhar* (*jawhar*) were highly valued in Iran, and there was a high level of craftsmanship employed in making good blades. Quoting the Qajar period manuscript Rostam al Tavarikh, Panahi Semnani (1995/1374:49–50) reports that Sadegh Khan Zand, the brother of Karim Khan who was the ruler of Basra, returned to Shiraz after the death of his brother amid fierce power-struggles among his successors. Alimardan Khan became the ruler of Isfahan and tried to weaken the position of Sadegh Khan. In order to do so, he ordered his craftsmen to make 3,000 *kārđ-hā* with excellent *jawhar* (crucible steel pattern) and enamelled golden scabbards – he presented a *kārđ* as a gift to each of his rulers and high-ranking officials. When this message reached Shiraz, many rulers and high-ranking officials who served Sadeg Khan became so greedy that they abandoned their positions and families in Shiraz and came to Isfahan, pledging service to Alimardan Khan just to receive such a *kārđ*.

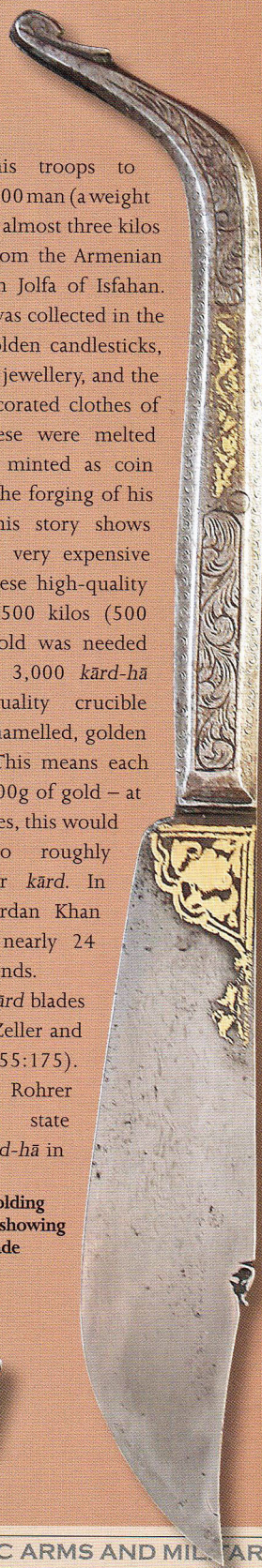
In order to finance this, Alimardan Khan had perpetrated a major crime. Panahi Semnani (1995/1374:50) reports that he

ordered his troops to confiscate 500 man (a weight measure of almost three kilos of gold) from the Armenian churches in Jolfa of Isfahan. This gold was collected in the form of golden candlesticks, trays, cups, jewellery, and the golden, decorated clothes of priests. These were melted down and minted as coin to pay for the forging of his *kārđ-hā*. This story shows that it was very expensive to make these high-quality *kārđ-hā*. 1,500 kilos (500 man) of gold was needed to pay for 3,000 *kārđ-hā* of high-quality crucible steel and enamelled, golden scabbards. This means each *kārđ* cost 500g of gold – at today’s prices, this would amount to roughly £7,800 per *kārđ*. In total Alimardan Khan had spent nearly 24 million pounds.

Some *kārđ* blades are dated (Zeller and Rohrer, 1955:175). Zeller and Rohrer (1955:176) state that the *kārđ-hā* in

A *čāqu* (a Persian folding knife) from the Qajar period (1794–1925 C.E.)

The Persian folding knife opened showing breadth of blade





the Moser Collection date from the end of the 16th century to the 19th century and suggest that the majority of better quality pieces come from the 17th and 18th centuries. Some of the *kārd-hā* in the inventory of the Reza Abbasi Museum in Tehran are dated as well and reveal that different styles were still being made during different eras, the three dated Safavid examples exhibiting a reinforced tip.

### Production of the Kārd

De Morgan observed that during the Qajar period (1794-1925 AD) the main industry in the small town of Kerman was making metal objects, especially locks. He also states that the steel workers were called *fulādgār* who, among other utensils, made sword grips, steel helmets, and iron mountings for shields. Since their products were not in high demand at that time, there were not many *fulādgārān* active, and this group, which was not a big one, exported their work to Turkey and Egypt. Further, it is stated that there was another guild called the *kārdgarān*, specialised in making good steel knives. All knives used in Iran were apparently produced in Isfahan. However, during the Qajar era, the products, these *kārdgarān* (knifemakers), were in little demand except amongst the tribes and some small villages. Therefore, a greater part of their work consisted in making ordinary knives (*kārd-hā*) and large, chopping knives (cleavers) for butchers and cooks.

High levels of competition caused by the flood of European mass-produced articles into the Iranian market during the Qajar period also presented a further problem to Iranian smiths. Al-Esfahani, the author of *Nesf-e Jahan*, stated that guns, pistols, swords, knives, and scissors in the past were exported from Isfahan to the rest of Iran but that by 1870 AD, due to cheap European imports, these crafts had become totally ruined.

It is of note that the Persian consumer was more fond of English knives than blades from his own country. As a result, there were many locally made imitations of English knives on the market, and the customers had to be very careful of they sought an original. The village Kurds often bought inferior articles under the false designation of *inglés* since the word 'British' was accepted among the Kurds as a mark of quality. Despite this situation, some Persian smiths were still able to make good-quality steel: Floyer had ordered some knives in Ra'in (province of Kerman) – but when they were delivered they had soft metal blades and proved useless. When Floyer criticised the smith, boasting of

Close-up of the curved *kārd* from the Zand period with chiselled floral design



his own Baluch axehead, the smith became so angry that he made Floyer a knife which he asserted could cut the axehead in two. After finishing the knife, and in front of a number of witnesses, he did just as he promised.

Floor (2003:265) quotes Tahvildar, who gives reports of *čāqusāz* making knives with black bone handles. These knives were of good quality, sharp, and of elegant form used for eating fruit. These were made both of cast steel (*āhan-e xošk*) and normal steel (*fulād*) (Floor, 2003:266). Tahvildar also stated that before European knives became common, the smiths used to make a type of steel blade in Isfahan with the shape of a *gizlik*, something between a knife (*kārd*) and a poniard (*qame*) with a long bone handle and a short flexible steel blade.

### Shape, materials, and decoration

In the majority of cases, the blade of the *kārd* is single-edged, yet there are examples of *kārd-hā* with double-edged blades. Double-edged *kārd-hā* normally have a central midrib but there are also examples of *kārd-hā* with slightly curved blades, often S-shaped. Some *kārd-hā* have reinforced tips, suggesting that they may have been intended as armour-piercing devices. In Persian, the reinforced tip of a dagger or knife is called *tokmeyer maxruti* (*makhruti*) or *noke maxruti*.

The single-edged blade was often made of mottle or woodgrain crucible steel, giving the appearance of a right-angled, long triangle with the edge being slightly curved towards the tip. Even the back of the blade, generally very thick at over 1cm, exhibits a slight curvature, and bears a very slight midrib along its centre, beginning at the base of the blade – the borders of the back of the blade also show slight ribs. Unlike *xanjar-hā* (*khanjar-hā*), there is a bolster between the grip and the blade of a *kārd*, covering the base of the blade. Zeller and Rohrer differentiate between three different forms of these bolsters: a) the blade itself forms this part in the shape of a ring, b) there is a faceted middle part that forms the bolsters, or c) the blade is covered on both sides with sloped cheeks of steel, forming the bolsters. In measuring the length of the blade, Zeller and Rohrer always take this part, together with the blade, to measure the total length since they argue that this part resembles the blade in material and decoration. Finally, a handle strap also covers the tang of the blade.

The majority of grip scales are made from walrus ivory since this material was



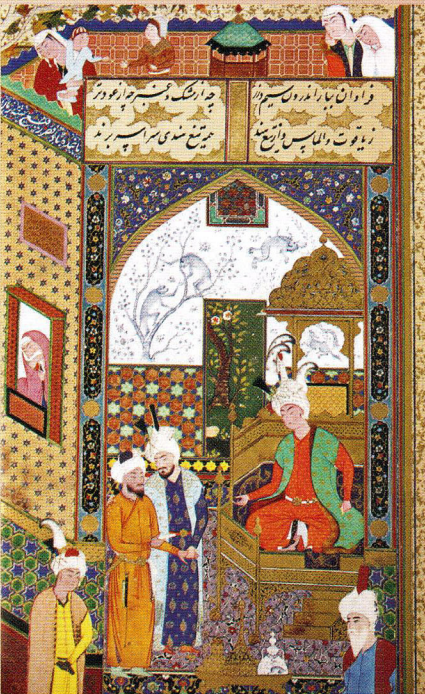


A man working with a *kārđ*; from the miniature 'King Tahmasp and the Imam Ali' from the manuscript *Xāvarānnāme* from the Timurid period (1370-1506 C.E.)

preferred to the elephant ivory from India (however, the presence of elephant ivory is not necessarily an indication of Indian origin). The tusks of a walrus are large, often exceeding two feet in length. A newly

acquired tusk has a white outer layer which yellows with exposure over time; the core substance of a walrus ivory tusk, however, is darker than its exterior surface and is made of many small, round crystals, appearing translucent against the light in contrast to the opaque outer layer. A walrus ivory handle with black spots (crystallines) was highly valued in India, and Khan Alam received a dagger as a gift from Shah Abbas with a hilt of piebald ivory in this manner. Khan Alam gave this dagger with a spotted walrus ivory

hilt to Jahangir, who was so enthralled that he ordered his men to search for more of the substance in Iran and Turan. Interestingly, Jahangir describes these spotted walrus ivory handle as *jōhardār* (*jawhardār*), referring to



A miniature from the *Šāhnāme* (*Shahname*) Tahmāspi from the Safavid period (1502-1722 C.E.); note the man armed with two *kārđ-hā* (Courtesy of Mowāser Museum)



A man with a *kārđ* in the sash; a painting from the Qajar period (1794-1925 C.E.) Courtesy of Rezza Abbasi Museum



A miniature from *Moraqqa' Golšan* from the Safavid period (1502-1722 C.E.); note the men on the left side armed with a *kārđ* hanging from the sash (Courtesy of Golestan Palace Museum)



Close-up of the Safavid blade with the chiselled and gilded inscriptions taken from the *suras an-Nasr* (Help) and *Al-Imran* (The Family of Imran) from the *Qur'an* and the gold-inlaid inscription *Amal-e Akbar* (the work of Akbar)

the similarity between the surface pattern of spotted walrus ivory to the surface pattern of wootz blades (a perfect match between a crucible steel blade (*tique-ye jōhardār*) and spotted/watered handle scales). Sources state that handles made of walrus ivory scales are stronger, finer, have smoother surfaces, and greater resistance (that is, they are less liable to slip in the hand) as compared to elephant ivory. There are also examples of *kārd-hā* where the tang of the blade has been inserted into a handle made from a solid piece of walrus or elephant ivory. Some *kārd-hā* also have scales of black horn, and there are others with handles of steel. At the end of the handle, the grip scales of *kārd-hā* become thicker and wider. The rivets attaching the ivory scales to the tang of *kārd-hā* with ivory or horn handle scales might either be visible or concealed.

The scabbard of a *kārd* appears to be of a very simple form. It is made of wood covered with simple black or green shagreen leather, in some cases, the leather extending over the grip such that it covers  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the handle. More elaborate pieces are covered in velvet or brocade. Very often, there is no scabbard mouth or chape, so the simplicity of the scabbard is in contrast to the beautiful wood grain or mottled pattern of the crucible steel of the blade. The base, bolster, and the grip are often employed in the same style of decoration.

A *kārd* from the Savaid period (1502–1722 C.E.); the forte of the blade is decorated with raised gold-inlaid lion attacking a deer set in floral design. For similar *kārd-hā* with the same style of decoration, see Moshtagh Khorasani (2006:604, cat.238, 606, cat.242)

There are different decorative styles on *kārd-hā*. One is a gold-inlaying technique, whereby the base, bolsters, and handle straps are cut, and gold wires are hammered into grooves. Frequently, the gold inlay is formed using the *zarnešān* (*zarneshan*) method, meaning that it stands out in relief. In chiselling or engraving, the base or, sometimes bolster and handle straps, are engraved and chiselled usually into floral designs. In the *tahnešān* (*tahneshān*) technique, the golden decoration on *kārd-hā* is not flat gold overlaying; instead, the gold protrudes slightly above the surface of the steel, forming a relief. Additional engravings and chiselling further decorate the blades. Zeller and Rohrer (1955:174) state that this form of decoration is also used in India, where the Indian craftsmen employ the Persian term *tahnešān*. This style is more elaborate than the shallow technique of gold-overlay technique (*koftegari*). Another method of overlaying is a sort of *champlevé* technique, where the dark, roughened surface of the steel is covered with gold, resulting in the darker steel parts being visible through the golden background. This is similar to the gilding process as discussed before and is used for long, decorative inscriptions. A less common decoration technique used on *kārd-hā* is enamelling. Against the golden background, enamel can look very beautiful and is used mainly for floral designs – thick or sparse branches and plants, with or without flowers, natural or stylised, as well as animals, such as predators, gazelles, and birds, decorate the *kārd* blades. The metal straps between the grip scales are also sometimes decorated with floral designs or with gold overlaying or chiselling. Makers' marks are uncommon on *kārd* blades although the invocations 'Ali' and 'Allah' or the end of a sura from the *Qu'ran* are sometimes found on *kārd* blades.

Close-up of the *āhanak* (handle straps) of the *kārd* from the Savaid period decorated with raised gold-inlaid images of lions hunting deers set in vegetal and floral design